DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 367 562 SO 023 704

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TITLE History Is More than Story: Expanding the Boundaries of Elementary Learning.
PUB DATE Nov 93
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council for the Social Studies (Nashville, TN, November 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Research; *Elementary School Curriculum; Grade 5; Historiography; *History; *History Instruction; Intermediate Grades; *Perspective Taking; *Primary Sources; *Social Studies

ABSTRACT

Because students should not only know stories about the past, but also understand the interpretive nature of historians' work, this study sought to discover whether instruction can develop elementary students' ability to engage in some aspects of historical interpretation. The study focused on fifth grade students. The research consisted of direct observation of classroom instruction over the course of a 5-week unit, informal conversations with teacher and students, analysis of 24 student compositions produced during instruction, and 4 open ended interviews with focus groups of 4 students each. After participating in activities in which they took the perspectives of different groups of people in the past, students were able to explain how these groups understood events differently, as well as the way in which present day perspectives affect the way stories about the past are told. The ability of students in the class to engage in historical interpretation cannot be understood apart from the teacher's instructional activities. The instructor frequently presented information through short lectures, in which discussion was encouraged by asking students to draw inferences or conclusions about the motivations of groups or individuals. When presenting information, the teacher frequently mentioned the way in which opinions and perceptions differed. The students were highly skeptical toward the reliability of present day historical accounts, and demonstrated their understanding that there is no single story with a straightforward and unproblematic meaning. Students had little understanding, however, of the way in which historians use and evaluate primary sources in order to construct stories. (DK)

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History is More than Story:

Expanding the Boundaries of Elementary Learning

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Presented to the College and University Faculty Assembly

National Council for the Social Studies

November, 1993

SO 023 704

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Abstract

Most educators and historians agree that students should not only know stories about the past but also understand the interpretive nature of historians' work. Research in a fifth-grade classroom indicates that instruction may develop students' ability to engage in many aspects of historical interpretation. After participating in activities in which they took the perspectives of different groups of people in the past, students were able to explain how these groups understood events differently, as well as the way in which present-day perspectives affect the way we tell stories about the past. Students had little understanding, however, of the way in which historians use and evaluate primary sources in order to construct those stories.

History is More than Story: Expanding the Boundaries of Elementary Learning

Perhaps no one is so naïve as to believe that history is simply a collection of stories, or that students' exposure to history should be limited to learning narratives about the past uncritically; Holt (1990) reflects the thinking of many educators and historians in arguing that students should be involved in evidence–based creations of historical accounts rather than simply "consuming" the stories created by others. But recent research suggests that however weak students' mastery of the received stories of American history may be, their understanding of the way in which historians interpret historical information and create historical accounts is even weaker (Brophy, VanSledright, & Bredin, 1992; VanSledright & Brophy, 1992; Wineburg, 1991, 1992). My research among fifth–graders confirms that their understanding of the evidentiary basis of historical knowledge is weak, but also suggests that meaningful instructional activities have tremendous potential to develop students' ability to engage in the kinds of interpretation which form the basis of historical understanding.

Although the proposition that history is "interpretive" commands widespread assent, the nature of such interpretation rarely receives explicit attention—and this lack of attention conceals the diversity of meanings which "interpretation" may carry. Some educators appear to regard the use and evaluation of sources as the key interpretive act of the historian. Proponents of the "new social studies," for example, sometimes equated interpretation in history with the process of systematic inquiry generally; Fenton (1966) identified asking analytic questions, seeking information, and evaluating evidence on the basis of internal and external criteria as the foundation of interpretation in the discipline of history. Similarly, the *History 13–16* curriculum of the Schools Council Project included attention to how historians evaluate sources, use evidence to establish facts, and reconcile conflicting explanations (Shemilt, 1980), and Brophy, VanSledright, and Bredin (1992)

have more recently referred to "decision rules that historians use in estimating the credibility of conflicting accounts" (p. 460).

But reconciling conflicting accounts or weighing evidence for authenticity is only one means by which historians engage in interpretation. A number of theorists—most notably Louis Mink (1978) and Hayden White (1984)—argue that the central interpretive component of historical knowledge is the process by which a narrative structure is imposed upon the events of this past. Historians must decide what story they wish to tell through their use of evidence, and in this process of narrativizing the past historians engage in their most important and far–reaching interpretive act. Indeed, it is only within the context of this narrativization that "events" from the past acquire any significance: until their place within a narrative structure has been established, events have no meaning and arguably cannot even be distinguished *as* events. Although such narratives claim status as historical truth, their validity can never be established by "evaluating" evidence, for their claim to truth lies not in the existence or reliability of particular sources but in the way in which evidence is arranged. This perspective does not erase the distinction between history and fiction, but rather maintains that historical narratives exert a claim to truth at a level of abstraction beyond that which can be verified by methodology. It is this meaning of interpretation—the way in which the perspective of an author shapes the nature of historical accounts—that is most evident in the classrooms described by Wineburg and Wilson (1991); Levstik and Pappas (1992) and Seixas (1993) have also explored the educational implications of viewing historical knowledge as the shared interpretive product of a disciplinary community.

Attempts to examine students' ability to understand the interpretive nature of history would benefit from attention to both these aspects of the creation of historical knowledge—the evaluation of sources and the imposition of narrative structure on the past. Rather than subsuming them within a broad and sometimes undefined category of "interpretation," however, researchers would do well to differentiate these two components of historical

understanding in exploring students' learning. My research in a fifth–grade classroom studying the American Revolution and the events leading up to it indicates that students were able to engage in some kinds of historical interpretation relatively easily. Students were, for example, highly skeptical toward the reliability of present–day historical accounts, and demonstrated their understanding that there is no single "story" of the American Revolution with a staightforward and unproblematic meaning. They recognized that different groups of historical actors had different perspectives on the events of which they were a part, and that present–day accounts of those events also may vary according to the perspective and interests of those who do the telling. Their knowledge of the kinds of evidence used in those interpretations, or the way in which historians evaluate that evidence, however, was weak.

This research consisted of direct observation of classroom instruction over the course of a five–week unit (for a total of slightly more than eighteen hours), numerous informal conversations with teacher and students, analysis of twenty–four student compositions produced during instruction, and four open–ended interviews with focus groups of four students each, conducted eight weeks after the end of the unit. The school was located in a racially homogenous (White), socioeconomically mixed suburb in a large metropolitan area. I chose this classroom largely because the teacher, Nancy, has a reputation for innovative and motivating teaching strategies and because she devoted consistent attention to history.

The ability of students in this class to engage in historical interpretation cannot be understood apart from Nancy's instructional activities. She frequently presented information through short lectures (twenty to thirty minutes), in which she encouraged discussion by asking students to draw inferences or conclusions about the motivations of groups or individuals. Occasionally she supplemented these presentations by showing filmstrips, having students find information in reference works or library books, and—infrequently—assigning short readings from the textbook. Students also read *Johnny*

Tremain concurrently during Reading class; although their discussions of that work focused primarily on literary issues, they also paused frequently for Nancy to explain necessary background information.

When presenting information to students, Nancy frequently mentioned the way in which opinions and perceptions differed—including, for example, the differences among Native Americans, English settlers, and French settlers during the colonial era; between Whigs and Tories during the American Revolution; between merchants who boycotted British goods and those who defied the boycott; between English supporters and opponents of the colonists' rights to representation; and between common soldiers and their leaders. She also often explicitly de–emphasized events and focused instead on the feelings of participants. In discussing the Intolerable Acts and the quartering of soldiers in colonists' homes, for example, Nancy told students that the book "doesn't explain it in full detail, it just tells what happened; but think how it would be if you were at your house with your family, and someone moved in and did what they wanted." She examined the feelings of the soldiers as well: "Think about this, these people were told they would have to leave their homes, and go across the ocean, and once they got here, there weren't doing anything, and it was like there's no reason to be here. How do you think they felt?"

A number of educators have identified empathy—the attempt to view events through the eyes of participants—as a central component of historical understanding (Ashby & Lee, 1987; Dickinson & Lee, 1984; Downey, 1993; Lee, 1978; Portal, 1987; Shemilt, 1984), and this emphasis on the feelings of participants was a constant theme of Nancy's instruction. She told students, for example, that they would not spend very much time on the war itself: "basically there was blood, there were bullets," she said, and they could look in their text for information about the battles if they were interested. Whether in discussing Native Americans' loss of land, the institution of apprenticeship, the winter at Valley Forge, or other topics, Nancy consistently asked students not simply to imagine what happened, but what it was like for participants. During our initial conversation, she

told me that she had an undergraduate history professor who stressed feelings and emotions more than dates; that was, she said, the first time she had really understood history, and as a result she tried to do the same in her class.

More importantly than simply presenting information, though, Nancy followed these presentations with assignments in which she asked students to take the perspective of historical actors. These length of these assignments ranged from thirty minutes to several hours, and students spent the majority of their instructional time in history engaged in such perspective–taking exercises. After students had studied the French and Indian War, for example, they began creating a class book explaining the viewpoints of the different groups involved. Nancy formed students into teams of two or three, and assigned each to write about the perspective of one of four groups—English settlers in North America, French settlers in North America, Native Americans, and the English in England—either before or after the war. Nancy asked students to pretend they were members of their assigned group and to brainstorm and write down their feelings, their goals, and how they would attain them. She emphasized that if they found themselves "making it sound like what some group did was awful, you should ask yourselves whether they might have had some reason for doing it."

Similarly, after a brief presentation and short reading on the Boston Tea Party (supplemented by background information from *Johnny Tremain*), Nancy again formed students into groups; this time she asked them to pretend that they were the English government and to decide how they should respond to the dumping of the tea. "You've been trying to help those people in America," she explained; "You've been sending them soldiers to protect them, and they're just like a bad child. You've sent over your tea, said they have to pay taxes, and suddenly the ship comes back and you think, 'Oh, good, they must have sold the tea.' And the guy says, 'You're not gonna believe what happened.'...England knows what happened, and they're furious. What would you do? What choices would you make?"

As she worked with groups of students engaged in these projects, Nancy listened to their ideas, asked them to back them up with reasoned arguments, and frequently tried to induce them more completely to place themselves in the position of the English. In one group, for example, a girl had argued that the British should make no response at all, since they were the mother country and the colonies were like their children, and "a mother wouldn't care." When the other members of her group pressed her on it, the student finally decided that England should settle for payment of half of the value of the tea that had been ruined. When Nancy heard her explanation, she asked, "If you had two hundred dollars, and someone stole it, you wouldn't want just half of it back, would you?" Nancy often took this slightly confrontational approach in asking students to place themselves in a particular position, and once when she asked me to work with a group of students, she suggested that we each play "devil's advocate" to their ideas.

Other examples of perspective-taking activities included writing a diary entry from the perspective of someone in Boston the day after the Tea Party, staging a debate on the right of the English to impose a tax on tea, and dramatizing various events from the Revolutionary Era. Nor were such exercises limited to the unit I observed; when I asked students what they had done in history before I began observing, many mentioned an assignment in which they had researched various explorers and then portrayed them in class presentations. Other students mentioned similar activities during their study of Native Americans.

The connection between instructional techniques and students' understanding is necessarily difficult to trace. Both during classroom activities and in subsequent interviews, though, students demonstrated their ability to examine the perspectives of various groups with some ease. During the assignment on the French and Indian War, for example, students had little difficulty explaining how their assigned group felt, and their efforts focused more on how best to represent those perspectives than on their content. Two girls—Diane and Stacey—had been assigned to write about the perspective of the English

settlers after the French and Indian War, for example. Diane asked her partner, "Aren't we glad about soldiers coming over?" Stacey agreed that they were, and Diane responded (while taking notes), "Okay, 'We're happy and we like England. And we still don't like the Indians.'" Stacey mentioned that they were "kinda worried those people might come back," and Diane agreed: "Okay, 'worried for another war.'" Stacey elaborated, "'Cause they were worried after the soldiers left, they might not be prepared," and noted that "they wanted to celebrate because they won; they like England a lot."

Most of Diane's and Stacey's discussion focused on how to compose and illustrate their composition; they eventually agreed to write it in the first person, and to describe an imaginary celebration conducted by a village of settlers:

> Postwar Feelings from the colonists
>
> Bang–bang! The last two shots were fired. "We won!" I shouted.
>
> We all went over to thank the soldiers for standing up for us. "God bless England," shreaked granpa.
>
> "Long live the King and Queen," we all screamed. Then the women started preparing a feast. We were going to celebrate our victory! Boy the feast was good!
>
> Then all the men started rebuilding the town. It took me a few weeks to get my house back together, and a few months to get the town back together, but when we were done we were proud. My wife, and my little troublemakers, in other words kids helped me fill the cracks with mud.
>
> Then all the soldiers went back to our mother country, England. We were all fine untill...Well that's another story![1]

Other students' discussions and compositions similarly reflected their understanding of differing perspectives. A group of boys assigned to represent the Native American point of view before the war, for example, wrote, "We were living peacefully around Vermont and New York, and the colonists came and took our land over. They fooled us by acting friendly and betrayed us with some paper called a 'treaty.' So we moved north to Canada." They continued by describing Native American alliances with the French and the eventual conflict with English soldiers. Another group who had been assigned the Native American perspective after the war wrote:

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[1] I have not edited student work for spelling, grammar, or punctuation.

> Angerly, we...walk away from our destroyed homes and land. We feel sad because the French used us as their soldiers for their own country. We should have been smart enough to not have been fooled by their kindness. We traveled slightly south west to what you call Ohio and Indiana. Then we headed Northwest, to start a new life. We are very upset because many of our people were killed in the French–Indian War. We would still have our precious land if those white settlers wouldn't have come over from England and France.

Another group of boys, taking the viewpoint of the English colonists before the war, began their composition with a narrative description: "In 1756 John Thomas woke in the middle of the night. He heard a noise downstairs. He went down to see the room on fire! He also saw Indians running away. Then an arrow flew into the wall a cm. above his head. He is suddenly in a state of shock. He was awakened by a burn at his foot. He ran out the back door to get help, but all the other houses were on fire. John ran into the woods." They continued by explaining, "In the 1750's, Indians were told by the French to raid and burn houses. The Indians did this because the houses were English houses. The English were their enemies and French wanted their land."

Students also had little difficulty taking the perspective of the British when Nancy assigned them to decide on a response to the Boston Tea Party; suggestions included harassing the colonists until they paid and taking them to court if they didn't; starving them into submission by creating a blockade around Boston; sending over more soldiers to guard tax collectors; and raising taxes on other goods. Even the student who maintained that there should be no response (because "a mother wouldn't care") did so not because she was able to view events only from one perspective, but because she had placed herself in the position of England–as–mother. And when staging the debate over England's right to tax imports to the colonies, students on each side created a list of logical and consistent reasons in support of their positions. Students were enthusiastic and excited both in planning and carrying out this debate, and their absorption in the roles continued as they prolonged the debate during their transition to other classes (cf. Wineburg and Wilson, 1991).

Students also demonstrated this ability to take different perspectives during follow-up interviews. When I asked whether or not everyone in the colonies felt the same about the American Revolution, for example, most students immediately responded that people had different opinions.[2] One boy noted that "different people felt differently: some people liked the British and some people didn't." When I asked what the reasons may have been for these differences, several students noted that some colonists may been willing to pay the taxes imposed by the British, and they suggested several reasons for that willingness. Some noted that some colonists may have considered the taxes fair; one student, for example, pointed out, "It's like if one person liked England and was like, 'Well, they helped us and everything, and it's fair to pay them back,' and they wouldn't want to start a war." Others identified the importance of ties to England: one girl, for example, suggested that "they liked their homeland, their home country, so they were willing to pay taxes."

Students also demonstrated during interviews their understanding that different groups of people in the *present* may have different perspectives on the events of the past, and may therefore tell different stories about the past. I asked students, for example, whether they thought the way they studied the American Revolution was different than the way students in England would study it. Most agreed that it would be different. Although one thought the difference would be because they speak a different language there, most stated clearly that it would be different because it would be written "from a British point of view" or that "you'd hear the British side." One student noted, "They'll probably look at the Revolution and go, 'Man, those are a bunch of scumballs over there, they went against us when we went with them." Another student agreed:

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2 The group nature of these interviews raises significant methodological questions. On the one hand, students' ability to discuss issues with each other, challenge each other, and expand on each others' ideas resulted in a depth and complexity of response which I have rarely been able to achieve in individual interviews. The reluctance of some students to insert themselves aggressively in these interviews, however, renders quantification meaningless: a student's silence in response to a question may represent assent, dissent, or disinterest. In reporting responses, then, I have attempted to portray the consensus of each group and to acknowledge explicit dissent when present.

> They look at it totally different, because they wanted us to pay the taxes, and we didn't want to pay the taxes, so our book said they were being real mean to us and everything, and their books would say, like, 'We tried and everything, and they just threw our tea in the water, and they turned against us, and we did all this nice stuff for them, and they just turned their backs on us, and we helped 'em all through their lives, and they just grow up and do all that stuff.' and so I think that their textbooks are a lot different than ours."

One student suggested that Paul Revere's raid might not even be covered in a British textbook, because "in our history books, that would be a really good and happy moment, but in theirs it's probably like a down, and they'd get really mad."

While interviewing one group of students, I also asked whether Native Americans might study American history differently. One student said, "You'd hate everybody." I asked why, and he said, "The English killed your ancestors, and the colonists, and England like wanted them dead, so they could have all that land back." He later brought up the same question on his own initiative, and said that people in the United States don't want to talk about the Vietnam war, because they lost—but that in Vietnam it "might be more of a happy issue" and so they would be more likely to study it.

Students thus appeared to understand that historical narratives are not simply straightforward retellings of past events, but that people had different perspectives on the events of the time and that present–day perspectives may also influence the way those stories are told. Their understanding of other aspects of historical interpretation—particularly the use and evaluation of evidence—however, was much weaker. Apart from identifying the significance of points–of–view, students showed little understanding of how historical accounts are created or how those accounts change over time. Although they were skeptical about the reliability of historical knowledge, they had little understanding of the way in which that knowledge is constructed in the first place.

When I asked how they knew what happened in the American Revolution, for example, nearly all students responded immediately with one of two answers—either their teacher told them, or they read it in books. When I asked how the people who write books know what happened, most responded that the information had been passed down orally

from generation to generation. One student suggested, "if they had like ancestors that were like there, back then, and they just passed it on," while another replied, "Maybe their grandma and grandpa told them, and their grandma and grandpa told *them*, and their grandma and grandpa told *them*"—and was about to continue until another student interjected, "We get the picture." When I pressed one group of students on whether they really thought that someone writing a book on the American Revolution would rely on what his or her grandparents said about it, they decided that the person would probably copy the information out of other books—the information in which would have been copied out of still other books, the ultimate source being either books written at the time or information passed down orally.

Occasionally students identified other sources of information. Several of them had recently read *Diary of Anne Frank*, and in two interviews students suggested that books might be based on the diaries of people alive at the time. One student mentioned that the authors of books rely on archives, but could not specify what might be found there. Other students noted the possibility of going to an old fort or battle site to find information, or looking at old muskets or uniforms in a museum. One girl suggested looking in the *Kentucky Post* from the time of the Revolution, but she and the other students in her group were uncertain whether there were newspapers then. When I told them that there were (although there was no *Kentucky Post*), they remembered that *Johnny Tremain* features a newspaper called *The Boston Observer*, and they immediately agreed that newspapers would be a good source of information.

Students' lack of knowledge of the evidentiary basis of historical information was also revealed in their discussion of how historical accounts change over time. I asked students whether they thought that the way they studied the American Revolution was different than the way their parents or grandparents studied it, and nearly all agreed that it would be different. Few explained that change by referring either to the discovery of new evidence or the changing societal use of history, however; instead, most students thought

that historical accounts today are different than in the past because they have been corrupted through repeated retellings. One noted that his parents' study of the Revolution would have been better because "it was closer to the war and stuff than it is now." Another student similarly noted that their parents' version would "probably be more truthful, since it was closer to the Revolutionary time, and now we're farther away." One girl succinctly characterized this perspective when she compared historical information to the game of "telephone," where messages are changed as more people retell them.

Other students pointed out that accounts in books may also have become corrupted: one student suggested that when their parents were young, there may have been "a good book" about the Revolution, but "it got old and gray, and so this guy decided to make a new book, and added things in it that weren't true." Another student agreed: "People add more things, like you put a point of view in, and then you want to add things to like make the book more exciting, so the kids are interested." As one girl said (to the agreement of her classmates), "People don't want the same thing over and over again," and so "it will be a little more exciting to put some action in it."

Two students, however, disagreed with the position that historical accounts are less accurate now than in the past. One girl (in the group who had discussed the presence of newspapers in colonial America) said, "I think we would know more, actually." When I asked her why, she said, "Because the more you look, the more someone probably *did* look at the newspapers, and back like when my grandma and grandpa were young, they probably didn't have as many books, as many, like, things to figure out from." In another interview, a student said that now, "they found out new and more information, and they have a way to find the information, but back then [in his parents' or grandparents' time] they didn't, they might not have known something." Arguing against this position, though, one girl drew upon her knowledge of how archeologists study Native Americans (a topic covered earlier in the year) to differentiate the two forms of knowledge: "With the Revolutionary War, there's not really stuff that you can find. I mean, what can you find

from then? But like Indians, I think your information is more accurate [now] because you can find things like buried."

One group of students also pointed to the societal use of historical knowledge in accounting for changes in how history is studied. One boy, for example, noted that "when my parents were in school, Columbus Day was celebrated as a celebration," but it no longer is "because of all the Indians that were killed." These students later suggested that they probably study Native Americans more, and Columbus less, than I (the interviewer) did when I was in fifth grade: "Now that stuff's more important now, because Native Americans, they were the first ones here, we were the second ones."

Given that most students thought historical accounts are like the end result of a game of telephone, it is perhaps not surprising that many of them staunchly maintained that information about the past is neither certain nor complete. Even after discussing the fact that historical accounts may be based on the journals of people alive at the time, one student noted that "you don't know if it's true or not, because no one witnessed it who's alive today." Other students also quickly added qualifications to their descriptions of how we know about the past; one noted, for example, that you can get information from books, but "you don't really know if it's true or not." Another student agreed that "it's a theory," and others suggested that people like Marco Polo or Columbus may just be made up.

When I asked students how they could decide which of conflicting sources was true, few were willing suggest that anything approaching certainty could be obtained. One student said, "You can try and look at other people's books and see what they have, and if all, some of the things are the same in each book, like take that type of idea...but it can't be, it can't always be true." Another student argued that "we could not really know what happened unless we had some way to travel back to see," and noted that some books say George Washington never cut down a cherry tree or threw a silver dollar across the Delaware, while other books do. One student suggested, "You could read a whole bunch of different books and see if they're all the same," but added, "But if they're different,

maybe you'll have to figure out which one's right and which one's wrong, and then you'll be confused; you would be like, 'Well, what happened here?'" Some students suggested asking teachers which information was correct, but most agreed that "you never know which one."

These interviews and observations demonstrate that these fifth–graders were able to do much more than reproduce the details or structure of stories about the past. They easily engaged in many important aspects of historical interpretation. Their ability to view events from the perspective of different participants places them high on the scale of historical empathy developed by Ashby and Lee (1987), and their recognition that present–day perspectives affect the way we tell stories about the past shows an understanding consonant with those of many theorists of history. Students' abilities must, of course, be seen in relation to Nancy's dedication to and consistency in planning exercises requiring them to take diverse perspectives. Like the teachers described by Wineburg and Wilson (1991), Nancy demonstrated that developing historical knowledge and developing historical understanding need not stand in opposition to each other.

Students' lack of knowledge regarding how historians use and evaluate sources, on the other hand, mirrors their lack of experience with that aspect of historical interpretation. Their skepticism regarding present–day historical accounts, however, stands in contrast to the findings of other recent work (Epstein, 1991; Wineburg, 1992), and suggests potential for developing their understanding of the interpretation of evidence. Students' spontaneous suggestion of several valid primary sources, and their idea that several such sources might be consulted in creating accounts of the past, suggest that even fifth–graders might benefit from activities designed to familiarize them with the use and evaluation of primary sources (cf. Levstik, 1986). By combining such activities with the kinds of empathy–generating instruction Nancy practiced, teachers may not only be able to help students remember stories about the past, but enable them to understand the way in which such stories are created from evidence and the purposes to which those stories are put in the present.

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